



Federal Literacy Facts

an update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

February 2002

Skills and Learning Discussion Paper Released What you need to know!

Ottawa: On February 12, 2002, almost one year since the federal government first announced its National Agenda on Skills and Learning in the 2001 Throne Speech, Human Resources Development Canada has released *Knowledge Matters*, a discussion (“Green”) paper on skills and learning that could re-shape the way the federal government works independently, and with the provinces and territories, to define, fund, and set policy for literacy in Canada.

Knowledge Matters is one of two papers presented by the federal government as part of Canada’s Innovation Strategy. *Achieving Excellence: Investing in People, Knowledge and Opportunity*, released on the same day by Industry Canada, focuses on how to strengthen research capacity and create an innovative, productive economy. Both papers are of interest to the literacy community, but *Knowledge Matters* most directly relates to literacy policy and future directions.

Knowledge Matters combines recent research on skills and learning, “expert” input gathered in a series of national roundtables last year, and the results of discussions with representatives from provincial and territorial governments. The document suggests broad policy directions for skills and learning and proposes national goals and milestones.

Although not highlighted as a separate policy piece, literacy is recognized throughout the document. Unfortunately, it is viewed primarily as it relates to labour market development.

Also, as literacy is under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments, finding roles for the federal government in shaping and investing in literacy goals is a major challenge.

Knowledge Matters provides an important focus for our input on the Skills and Learning Agenda. Below, MCL has provided an initial analysis of the paper with emphasis on the implications for literacy. MCL plans to use the government’s framework as a base to create tools for canvassing the literacy community and promoting debate and discussion around the Skills and Learning Agenda. This process will feed into the government’s consultative strategy. Watch for details in future issues of *Federal Literacy Facts* and on MCL’s website!

Knowledge Matters: A section-by-section review

The Introduction outlines the rationale for an innovation strategy and outlines three key imperatives driving the innovation strategy: (1) our knowledge-based economy demands a skilled workforce; (2) a looming demographic crunch will exacerbate the skills shortage; and (3) a “learning system” that needs strengthening.

The document focuses on four priority action areas: (1) children and youth; (2) post-secondary education; (3) labour market development; and (4) immigration.

(1) Children and Youth

A significant minority of Canadian children and youth, especially low-income and Aboriginal youth, are at risk of not developing their learning potential. This section emphasizes early intervention, especially the need to ensure that kids enter school ready-to-learn. It also highlights concerns about schooling quality and outcomes. It notes that “one in four high school graduates 16-25 years old have literacy skills that fall below the generally accepted minimum for further learning. This means that many young Canadians leave high school without the literacy skills needed for full participation in the knowledge economy.”¹

Noteworthy: Among the stated goals in this section are: “all students who graduate from high school achieve a level of literacy sufficient to participate in the knowledge-based economy” and “Canada becomes one of the top three countries in mathematics, science, and reading achievement.” *Nowhere in the section is “family literacy” mentioned.* Proposed federal roles focus on advancing current federal programs (e.g., School Net) or agendas (e.g., the Early Childhood Development Agreement). As well, there is an emphasis on the role of the federal government as “knowledge broker”, facilitating research about the relationships between “learning outcomes and key learning determinants in the home, school and the community” and measuring and providing information on skills and learning results.²

(2) Postsecondary Education – Strengthening Access and Excellence

This section addresses general barriers to post-secondary education, but emphasizes barriers for low-income Canadians, people with disabilities, and Aboriginal peoples. It highlights the role of community colleges as a delivery system for life long learning; an improved apprenticeship system; and the need for post secondary institutions to address mobility issues and to recognize “prior learning”.

The stated goal is to ensure that “all qualified Canadians have access to high-quality post-secondary education” and that “one hundred percent of high school graduates have the opportunity to participate in some form of post-secondary education”. Among the suggested federal roles are: increasing current direct delivery federal programs (e.g., the Millennium Scholarship); working with the provincial and territorial governments to reduce barriers for low-income and disabled populations, with emphasis on part-time education so these populations can “earn while they learn”.

Noteworthy: The section states explicitly that the “lack of literacy is a key barrier to post secondary education” and restates that one quarter of high school graduates lack adequate literacy skills, effectively blocking a large number of youth from post-secondary learning.³ However, the explicit goal that all “qualified” Canadians have access to post-secondary education demands a definition of “qualified”. Of special interest to adult learners is the recognition that: “Canada’s limited capacity to recognize skills acquired outside of the formal education system, or in other countries, is a pressing issue for many people and deprives the economy of the benefits of these skills.”⁴

(3) Labour Market Development

This section has the most direct references and links to literacy. It reviews the challenges imposed by the new economy and makes the links between skills development and the creation of a competitive, productive economy. It notes that “lack of literacy skills poses a significant barrier to integration and re-integration into the labour market” and that “nearly eight million Canadians—more than 40 percent of working age Canadians—lack the basic literacy skills required for successful participation in our rapidly changing economy.” It also states that “The very requirements for literacy have changed. What was sufficient in an industrial era no longer equips people for success in a knowledge society.”⁵

¹ Knowledge Matters, 17

² Knowledge Matters, 23

³ Knowledge Matters, 28

⁴ Knowledge Matters, 31

⁵ Knowledge Matters, 39

This section also acknowledges that our adult learning infrastructure has gaps: for example, the capacity for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).⁶ Some suggestions for an enhanced federal role include: reviewing federal tax incentives (e.g., education tax credits); expanding sector councils; looking to Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDAs) as a multi-jurisdictional tool for addressing labour market challenges; expanding the role of the federal government as “knowledge broker”, (developing and disseminating expertise and information related to skills acquisition); and any active federal/provincial labour market measures that encourage the participation of marginalized groups – including individuals with low levels of literacy or foundation skills.

Noteworthy: One of the goals outlined in this section is that: “**the number of adult Canadians with low literacy skills is reduced by 25 percent over the next decade**”.⁷ We have some concern that governments may be hoping to achieve this goal through demographic changes in the population rather than active policy enhancement and investment. A second goal is that “within five years, the number of adult learners increases by one million men and women throughout all segments of society”.⁸ We might ask: What percentage of this increase should be literacy learners? Although the need to raise literacy and foundational skill levels is mentioned frequently throughout this section, there is little reference to how the federal government can play a direct role in this. One area explored as a potential target is workplace literacy. The paper notes that although foundational skills are crucial, and businesses are well positioned to help employees develop these, employers seem more willing to sponsor training for job-specific skills. It appears that the federal government’s role in sector councils or LMDAs might provide an opportunity for enhancing workplace literacy.

This section is the only one that specifically refers to the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS).⁹ However, the reference only reviews the role that the NLS currently fulfills.

(4) Immigration

The paper makes it clear that Canada’s future productivity and competitiveness depend on immigration: immigrants are expected to account for all net population growth by 2031.¹⁰ This section focuses on the importance of attracting “highly skilled immigrants” and then ensuring that they don’t face roadblocks to labour force participation once they settle in Canada.

Noteworthy: There is no reference at all to immigrants with low literacy skills in this section. Among the suggested milestones is: “by 2010, 65% (up from 58% in 2000) of adult immigrants have post secondary education”.¹¹ With a shift to “highly qualified” immigrants, we may be forced into the position of defending current programs serving those with fewer skills.

The Government Plan – What’s Next?

It doesn’t appear, either from *Knowledge Matters*, or from questions we’ve raised with HRDC officials, that the consultative process is set in stone at this point. However, this is what MCL has learned to date. The consultative phase will stretch out over this year and possibly next year, and will include a range of consultations running on several tracks.

“This paper is an invitation from the government of Canada to participate in a national dialogue on what Canada needs to do to respond to the challenges of the knowledge-based economy.”

Hon. Jane Stewart

⁶ Knowledge Matters, 41

⁷ Knowledge Matters, 46

⁸ Knowledge Matters, 46

⁹ Knowledge Matters, 44

¹⁰ Knowledge Matters, 49

¹¹ Knowledge Matters, 53

These are the Skills and Learning consultations planned by the federal government:

1. Five “expert” roundtables will focus on the priority areas outlined in *Knowledge Matters*; discussing the proposed goals and milestones, testing them with Canadians, and getting consensus that they are the right ones. We can expect these soon.
2. A series of *Best Practices Workshops* (at least ten) will include both “experts” and front-line practitioners in areas such as literacy, workplace-based skills development, e-learning, etc. This process could stretch into next year.
3. Consultations will be held with “stakeholder representatives” (groups like Movement for Canadian Literacy), likely before Fall.
4. Consultations between federal and provincial government representatives will be ongoing.

MCL is seeking further clarification about any opportunities for stakeholder input, inside and outside of the formal consultative process, and will communicate details to the literacy community. Clearly this is a long term strategy and process that will take years and multiple budget cycles to fulfill.

So why is this important?

We understand that your workloads are overwhelming. Why should you care about a policy discussion spearheaded in Ottawa?

Here's why: solving the skills and learning challenge will require buy-in from various levels of government and sectors of society. But the federal government has an acknowledged responsibility for “promoting our development as an inclusive society” and so should provide leadership on this issue. *This is an opportunity to make sure literacy gets the priority policy consideration it deserves. It's also our chance to find a common voice and to help set national goals. Please help us make the most of it!*

MCL's Action Plan – What's Next?

- MCL will continue to monitor developments at the federal level, especially concerning the consultations, and will keep the literacy community informed.
- MCL will produce a collection of tools to promote discussion about the role of literacy within the broader national Skills and Learning Strategy and facilitate the literacy community's participation in the government's consultative strategy.
- Among the tools developed will be user-friendly discussion guides to facilitate group responses from practitioners and learners.
- The toolkit and background materials on the Skills and Learning Agenda will be posted on a special section of MCL's website.
- If possible, MCL will host its own roundtable of national and provincial/ territorial literacy organizations, possibly in conjunction with the MCL Board Meeting and AGM scheduled for early May 2002.
- Once the feedback is collected and reviewed, MCL will develop a Policy Paper that unites the voices of the broader literacy community. This paper will make the case for improved literacy investments, policies and practices; and suggest concrete ways in which the federal government can help make literacy an integral part of an improved learning system in Canada.
- MCL will launch an outreach campaign to inform decision makers and stakeholders of our findings and collective vision.
- Literacy Action Day 2002 will be used to reinforce our goals and promote concrete measures to see those goals realized.

Note: The two government discussion papers, *Knowledge Matters* and *Achieving Excellence*, are online at www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca